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ABSTRACT

The role of grammar instruction in proficiency-oriented second language instruction (POI) is examined, drawing on research and theory on second language use and instruction. Several premises are stated: (1) formal grammar has an important role in POI, while focus on form and communicative practice should be maintained; (2) in POI, a syllabus that is cyclical in nature is recommended; (3) since POI does not prescribe any specific methodology, second language teachers need to discover for themselves which approach to grammar instruction is most effective; and (4) additional research comparing the traditional approach with the whole-language and input-processing approaches is needed. (Contains 23 references.) (MSE)

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Understanding the Role of Grammar in Proficiency-Oriented Instruction

by

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The purpose of this article to bring some light to the controversial issue of the role of grammar in proficiency-oriented instruction. The concept of "developing accuracy" has led to a number of questions about the role, effect, and usefulness of formal grammar instruction in second/foreign language learning and acquisition. Some of these questions are: Is it effective to teach grammar? To what extent? Is it effective to explain grammar rules? To what extent? Does formal focus on grammar interfere with the goals of proficiency-oriented instruction?

For more than a decade now, proficiency has been highly advocated by foreign language professionals at all levels as the organizing principle around which to design instruction; as a result, a proficiency-oriented approach has been adopted by most school systems across the nation. We now understand what proficiency is and what proficiency-oriented instruction represents. Proficiency is the outcome of language learning, and proficiency-oriented instruction is not a method, it does not represent a fixed set of materials; it constitutes a basic principle upon which we organize what we do in our FL classrooms in order to help our students read, write, listen, and speak effectively in a target language as well as to learn about and understand the culture of such language (James, 1985).

Also, we understand that being proficient in a second/foreign language (L2/FL) indicates being able to participate in different contexts, perform different functions using the target language with accuracy. The trisection context/content, function, and accuracy has led us to rethink our views of what language competence and performance mean. Textbooks have changed considerably to echo the principles of proficiency-oriented instruction. And we, teachers, provide students with opportunities to communicate in the target language in a variety of contexts while performing a number of functions with a reasonable degree of accuracy. We know that in proficiency-oriented

instruction these three components -context/content, function, and accuracy- are equally important, and curricula as well as classroom activities must be based on various combinations of them.

Without doubt the literature shows that formal focus on grammar is important in language learning and acquisition. Omaggio (1993) has stated in one of her hypotheses for the implementation of proficiency-oriented instruction that we need to strive for accuracy providing appropriate feedback and diverse means for error correction. To this Omaggio (1993) remarks that: "there is a role for form-focused instruction in a proficiency-oriented approach used in a judicious blend with communicative language practices" (p.84).

Even advocates of the natural approach (Krashen, 1987; Terrell, 1991), have acknowledged the need for formal grammar instruction. According to Terrell (1991), grammar instruction can affect the acquisition process in three different ways: (a) as an advanced organizer, which gives the learner information about the target language forms and structures that will aid in processing the input; (b) as a meaning-form focuser for complex morphology, which can affect the acquisition process by aiding the learner in establishing a meaning-form relationship for morphological complex forms; and (c) as a monitor, which can help the L2 learner to produce more accurate and more complex sentences, and which can also serve as input to the acquisitional process. In summary, Terrell (1991) suggests a role for formal grammar instruction which has also been advocated by other researchers such as Ellis (1990) and VanPatten (1986): that of an aid to the learner in the acquisition process because it can make certain grammatical forms more salient, thus helping the learner to establish correct meaning-form connections. Similarly, Long (1991) remarks that formal grammar instruction offers three advantages over programs with no focus on form: (1) it speeds up the rate of learning; (2) it

affects acquisition processes in ways possibly beneficial to long-term accuracy, (3) it appears to raise the ultimate level of attainment.

The debate now is not so much on whether the teaching of grammar is important or not to facilitate proficiency in the L2 , but rather on "how" to teach grammar. The debate is now seen in dichotomies such as the following: traditional approach vs. input processing, traditional vs. whole language approach, bottom-up vs. top-down approach, inductive vs. deductive approach, explicit vs. implicit approach. These dichotomies are based on models of second language acquisition and learning. The traditional approach is characterized by a sequence of steps: presentation of grammar rules, mechanical practice followed by more communicative practice. It is mainly bottom-up and explicit. This approach has been highly criticized and it is challenged by two "new" approaches: the whole language and the input processing. These alternative approaches to teaching grammar focus on meaning, input, and comprehension.

Comparison of Approaches

The Traditional Approach.

In the traditional approach, students learn grammar rules and later practice using them in communication. This approach uses skill-getting activities first (mechanical drills to focus students' attention on correct forms without requiring them to attend to the meaning itself). Later, once the forms have been mastered, skill-using activities are employed. In this phase, students use the learned structures in communicative activities designed to focus their attention on meaning and interaction. The main criticism to the traditional approach is its lack of contextualized practice during the skill-getting phase and the disintegration of the language in small parts or sections. Comprehensible input is lacking and the teacher remains the authoritative figure without the participation and contribution of the students in the exploration of grammar rules

and linguistic patterns. Sample activities typically used in the traditional approach to teaching grammar are as follows:

A. Directions. Change the verb into the preterit.
1. Almuerzo en la cafetería.
2. Empiezo a hacer la tarea a las 4:00 de la trade.

B. Directions. Describe what Gustavo did yesterday.
1. ..... (salir)/apartamento/las nueve
2. .....(llegar)/oficina/las diez.

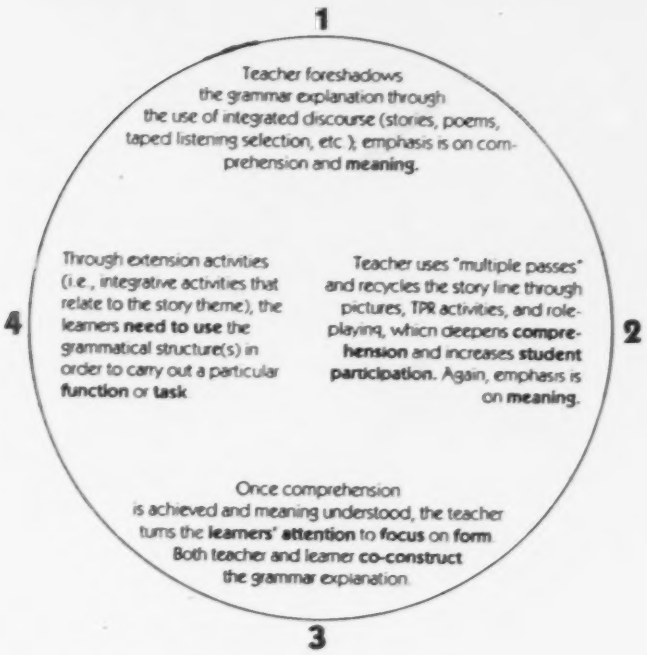
C. Directions. Answer the following questions with a partner.
1. ¿Dónde estudiaste ayer?
2. ¿A qué hora te acostaste anoche?

Whole Language Approach

An alternative to the traditional approach to teaching grammar is the whole language approach. The whole language approach is top-down and it is based on the premise that "language is language only when it is whole" (Goodman, 1989). Goodman (1989) remarks that it is the whole that gives meaning to its parts. In terms of grammar instruction words, phrases, or sentences are not linguistic islands into themselves; on the contrary, the linguistic elements only gain meaning when they are placed in context, and when used in conjunction with the whole (Shrum and Glissan, 1994).

A whole language approach stresses natural discourse and encourages students to comprehend meaningful and longer samples of discourse from the very beginning of the lesson. Its focus is first comprehension of the input. Once comprehension is achieved, the teacher then turns the students' attention to various linguistic elements. This approach is cyclical as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A whole Language Approach to Grammar Instruction (Source: Adair- Hauck and Donato, in Shrum & Glissan, 1994).


1
Teacher foreshadows the grammar explanation through the use of integrated discourse (stories, poems, taped listening selection, etc.); emphasis is on comprehension and **meaning**.
2
Teacher uses "multiple passes" and recycles the story line through pictures, TPR activities, and role-playing, which deepens **comprehension** and increases **student participation**. Again, emphasis is on **meaning**.
3
Once comprehension is achieved and meaning understood, the teacher turns the **learners' attention** to **focus** on **form**. Both teacher and learner **co-construct** the grammar explanation.
4
Through extension activities (i.e., integrative activities that relate to the story theme), the learners **need to use** the grammatical structure(s) in order to carry out a particular **function** or **task**.

The Input Processing Approach.

The input processing approach has been proposed by VanPatten (1995, 1996) based on the essential role that comprehensible input has in the development of second language acquisition (SLA) (Krashen, 1987; Terrell, 1991; Ellis, 1990). Its main feature is its focus on input and comprehension processes rather than on the production processes as emphasized in the traditional approach.

This approach also known as processing instruction aims at altering the way in which learners process input: "its purpose is to direct learner's attention to relevant features of grammar in the input and to encourage correct form-meaning mappings that result in better intake" (VanPatten, 1995, p. 172) while pushing the learners not to rely on their existing processing strategies. For the purpose of clarification, intake is the subset of input that a learner comprehends

and from which grammatical information can be made available. Processing strategies are strategies used by L2 learners during input processing (VanPatten 1984, 1985, 1990, 1995).1

The input processing approach is based on VanPatten (1995)'s model of second language acquisition and use (Figure 2). This model is conceived as sets of processes that "convert input to intake" (I), "promote the accommodation of intake and the restructuring of the developing linguistic system" (II), and that "account for certain aspects of language production" (III) (VanPatten and Sanz, 1995, p. 170-171). which is conceived as sets of processes such as the following:

Figure 2. Model of Second Language Acquisition and Use (VanPatten, 1995)

I = input processing
II = accommodation, restructuring
III = access, control, monitoring

In input processing the teacher intervenes at the students' conversion of input to intake (I): "[it] attempts to alter the strategies and mechanisms used by language learners when processing input ... As learners process an incoming input string, it must be tagged and coded in particular ways. If the language is to be learned, the internal processor(s) must eventually attend to how the propositional content is encoded linguistically" VanPatten and Sanz 1995, p. 170-171). The input processing approach to grammar instruction is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Input Processing Approach (VanPatten, 1995)

VanPatten (1995) recommends a number of guidelines when implementing processing instruction: (1) Teach only one thing a time; (2) Keep meaning in focus; (3) Learners must "do something" with the input (comprehension); (4) Use both oral and written input; (5) Move from sentences to connected discourse; and (6) Keep the psycholinguistic processing mechanisms in mind (p. 173). Sample activities that are used in this approach are: (Source: Cadierno, 1995):

A. Directions. You are going to hear some sentences in Spanish. Decide whether each sentence you hear has occurred in the present or in the past.

a. present b. past

B. Directions. Listen to a famous event. Do you know who performed the action? (The students are read 10 sentences describing famous events, and they had to match each event with the correct name of the famous person written on their answer sheet.)

A number of studies have been conducted comparing and contrasting the traditional approach to grammar instruction with the input processing approach (Cadierno, 1995; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993, VanPatten, 1995, 1996). Findings from these studies have indicated that the input processing approach have greater effect on the subjects' ability to comprehend as well as to produce the target item. In addition, the subjects' production became more accurate when speaking as well as when writing. VanPatten recommends that more studies of this kind be done to continue verifying the success he has obtained using the approach he proposes.

Conclusions

To conclude the following premises can be stated regarding the teaching of grammar in proficiency-oriented instruction (POI): First, formal grammar instruction has an important role in POI while a judicious blend between focus on form and communicative practice is maintained: "a kind of 'hybrid' approach that recognizes the contributions of both kinds of teaching to the learning process (Omaggio, 1993). Second, in proficiency-oriented instruction it is recommended to use a syllabus that is cyclical in nature. At each level of language instruction, certain structures (as well as functions and topics) would be taught for full control, others for partial control, and still others for conceptual control. That is what is taught for partial control or conceptual control at one level of proficiency will be recycled at subsequent levels where full or partial control will be the goal (Heilenman and Kaplan, 1985). Third, since proficiency-oriented instruction does not prescribe a given methodology, second/foreign language instructors need to try for themselves what approach to the teaching of grammar results to be the most effective depending mainly on the learning styles of their students and the grammatical aspects to be taught. Maybe it is wrong to think in terms of having to choose one approach over another; maybe a variety of approaches provided we attend to content/context, function, and accuracy may prove a better option. And finally, research comparing the traditional approach with the whole language and input processing approaches is in its early stages. More studies are needed to gather more evidence on the advantages and disadvantages of each of these approaches in second/foreign language learning and acquisition processes in proficiency-oriented classrooms.

Notes

1 An example of a processing strategy is the word-order strategy: "Language [English] learners ... tend to process the first noun or noun phrase before a verb

as the subject (agent) of the verb (action) and to process the postverbal noun or noun phrase as the object (Erving-Tripp, 1974; Gass, 1989; Lee, 1987; LoCoco, 1987). In languages such as Spanish, where subject nouns and noun phrases may be postponed and object nouns as well as object pronouns may appear preverbally, this processing can result in an incorrect or incomplete coding of the data. For example, it has been shown that a sentence such as *'La sigue el señor'* is likely to be misinterpreted as *'She follows the man'* rather than *'The man follows her'*. Object pronouns that follow preverbal subjects are likely to be skipped over because they do not fall in the expected spot in the utterance. Thus, with *'Mario la conoce bien'*, *'la'* may be ignored by the learner's internal processor. The result is that the learner internalizes an erroneous rule that Spanish word order is Subject + Verb + Object (SVO).

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